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# The Medieval Herbal Tradition of Macer Floridus

by Bruce P. Flood, Jr.\*

IN THE HISTORY of pharmacy and botanical therapy in the Middle Ages the literature of Constantinus Africanus and the school of Salerno come to mind immediately as authoritative sources. No one can deny their influence on medieval botany and medicine, yet curiously enough what was undoubtedly one of the more widely read works in this field during the entire medieval period appeared contemporaneously with both Constantinus and the rise of Salerno. This work, an herbal entitled *Macer Floridus De virtutibus Herbarum*, consists of a catalogue of 77 herbs and their supposed medicinal properties; all expressed in 2269 lines of vulgar Latin verse. Even more curious is the fact that this poem not only refers to earlier medieval and botanical authors such as Walafrid Strabo; it was itself copied in part into the most significant remaining document of the medical school at Salerno, the *Regimen Sanitatis Salernitanum*.<sup>1</sup> Macer Floridus is important not only for medical and botanical knowledge but also for a wider range of medieval intellectual history. Its significance lies in the fact that it is the first document of such length to indicate a renewed interest in these subjects in the 11th century, and appears to reflect no direct influence from any Arabic sources.<sup>2</sup>

What is the provenance of this literary work? As the researches of the 19th century German medical historians Valentin Rose and H. Stadler have shown, virtually the entire poem is based upon Pliny the Elder's *Historia Naturalis*. Many Renaissance scholars believed Macer to have been written during the time of the Roman Empire, yet because of a clear reference in it to Walafrid Strabo (806?-849) it is obvious that the author could not have written it before the 9th century.<sup>3</sup> In addition, as at least two other scholars have pointed out, since it fails to mention any Arabic literary sources or any of the drugs introduced by the writings of Avicenna, and because portions of it do appear in the *Regimen* of Salerno, it must have been composed somewhere between the death of Strabo and the establishment of Arabic medicine in the west near the end of the 9th century.<sup>4</sup>

Who was Macer Floridus? The answer to this question might give us a more precise date as to when it was written. The name "Floridus" was probably a fanciful name inspired by the subject matter, and "Macer" may have been used to convince the reader that the poem had its origins in the time of Augustus, very likely from the pen of the Roman poet and naturalist Aemilius Licinius Macer (85-15 B.C.). Conversely it could have been adopted after the manner of the Carolingian literary savants who appropriated the names of famous classical literary personalities. The medieval writer Gaudentius Merula (1424-1494)

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said that the real author was a certain doctor named Odo, whose name he claimed to have seen in an older medical text. At least two available manuscripts of the work contain appended references to one "Odo Magdunensis."<sup>5</sup> The botanical historian Ernst Meyer, and Salvatore de Renzi, editor of the Salernitan collection, maintain that this Odo was a southern Italian, on the grounds that is Greek equivalent accompanies each Latin herbal noun, and because names of illnesses and other Greek terms and allusions to mythological subjects appear in the poem.<sup>6</sup> The German literary historian Max Manitius, on the other hand, points out that the Greek is extremely corrupt, which suggests that it was less grammatically correct than Meyer indicates. Certainly a slight knowledge of Greek was not confined exclusively to southern Italy, since traces of it were preserved in western France until the 11th century. In fact Manitius himself, along with the 18th century historian Albrecht von Haller and the early 19th century physician Ludwig Choulant believe Odo to have been a Frenchman. Manitius argues that certain plant names, such as *nardus gallica*, *celtica spica*, and *derte* (in French *dartre*), while at first ignored in western France along with certain other latinized plant names, do appear later in this area.<sup>7</sup> Haller uses philological evidence in stating that because the poet translated "isatis" to "gaisola" he must have been French, and Choulant shares this view.<sup>8</sup> Manitius goes one step further by dating Odo somewhere in the first half of the 11th century because Odo was privy to Walafid Strabo's *De cultura hortorum*, the oldest manuscript of which was constructed during that century. Stadler, by proving that parts of the poem have come from Constantinus Africanus, would narrow the probable date to between 1070 and 1112, the latter being the year of the death of Sigebertus Gemblacensis, who was the first subsequent medieval author to mention Macer. A closer locating of this Odo rests with the significance of the word "Magdunensis," which according to Cyrill Resak should be equivalent to Meudon, which means Moldunum or Modunum, a reference to Meung-sur-Loire, a town located on the Loire river between Blois and Orleans. Manitius' analysis here indicates that the traces of Greek could mean that Odo had been trained in a school either at Fleury or Orleans, both of which are in the vicinity of Meung.<sup>9</sup> So these researches indicate that the author of *Macer Floridus* may have been a Frenchman who lived near Meung somewhere between 1070 and 1112, yet there has been no conclusive evidence.<sup>10</sup>

Literary correlation has shown that Macer is based not only on Pliny's *Historia Naturalis*, but also on a work entitled *Medicina* by the 2nd century Roman historian and medical writer Gargilius Martialis, and on Dioscorides' *De materia medica*. Manitius feels the author may have derived most of the Pliny through Gargilius, since so many of Pliny's phrases recur in Gargilius' work. In any case at least 38 chapters (including the *Spuria*) are derived for the most part from Dioscorides, Pliny and Gargilius. Also, beside Walafid Strabo, the poet mentions many others, including Galen, Hippocrates and Menemachus as well as Paladius.<sup>11</sup> Where he does not identify his authority specifically by name he utilizes such words as "fertur," "dicitur," "auctores," or "doctis medicis." Stadler notes the extremely unorganized manner in which the material is used. The text of a single author may run for nearly the length of a chapter with its introduction being taken from a different source. Other chapters are assembled in similar, mosaic-like fashion.<sup>12</sup>

Structurally the work consists of 2756 unrhymed lines of dactylic hexameter verse (including the *Spuria*), although the number of verses and order of chapters varies greatly in the several manuscripts and printed editions. Its 77 chapters are of unequal length and are divided into two parts: one concerned primarily with herbs, and the other (beginning with verse 2056 in Choulant's

critical edition) with certain species of herbs which were thought to possess rare medicinal properties. There are 20 additional chapters, called in Choulant's edition the *Spuria Macri*, which were appended later in the style of the original poem. As to literary quality, scholars refer to the Latin as "barbaric" and "dry and arid," and one modern French expert considers it a collection of mnemonic verses that should not be dignified by the term poem.<sup>13</sup> Certainly the pleasing style of Walafrid Strabo is completely absent. One is struck by the extremely colorless and didactic nature of the work, especially the repetition in describing each herb and its medicinal uses, and the joining of descriptions with endless conjunctions and prepositions.

Yet questions persist as to why the poem was written, and as to what accounts for its wide circulation in the Middle Ages and after. The scarcity of medical and botanical treatises for general use at this time, the reverence for classical writers among medieval intellectuals, and a strong reliance upon superstition, folk medicine and home remedies probably account for its widespread circulation. This herbal could have been written by either a layman or learned clerk for general consumption, since the constant reference to female ailments, contraceptive preparations and aphrodisiacs would suggest it had not been written by an ascetic recluse (without excluding the possibility of its having been written by a worldly monk). It could very well have served as a vehicle enabling the writer to display his classical knowledge and even imitate the classics much after the fashion of a Boethius or a Cassiodorus, similar to what Polydore Virgil did in the 15th century. There is no direct evidence of experimentation, and some question whether or not the author actually ever saw or attempted to use any of the herbs of which he wrote. Nor does he affirm having witnessed any of the cures he mentions.<sup>14</sup>

Whatever one may think about the value or the purpose of this herbal there is no disputing its tremendous influence on medical and botanical literature from the early Middle Ages on. It was known by some of the famous medieval mendicant preachers such as the English Dominican Master Rypon of Durham, a contemporary of Chaucer's, and the German Franciscan Brother Berthold.<sup>15</sup> One researcher has estimated that Macer was among the sources of St. Hildegard of Bingen, as evidenced in the "De Plantis" section of her *Physica*. A certain Master Bartolomeus of Salerno (ca. 1150) mentioned it in the appendix to his *Introductiones et experimenta in practicam Hippocratis, Galeni, Constantini, graecorum medicarum* (a work which by the 13th century was translated into high and low German and Danish), and it was also one of three major sources used by Rufinus in his *De Virtutibus Herbarum*. Max Manitius believed that the Salernitan medical writer Matthias Platearius quoted Macer in the chapter on Absinth in his *Circa Instans*, and although there is no mention or citation of the poem, some passages bear a close similarity to the poem.<sup>16</sup> It is certain that the French Dominican Vincent of Beauvais (1190-1264) copied about two-thirds of the poem into his *Speculum Naturale* (books IX-XV), and that Alexander Neckam (1157-1217) refers to Macer in his *De Naturis Rerum*.<sup>17</sup> The poem is also cited by medieval grammarians and library commentators. One example is its inclusion in Hugo of Trimberg's compilation in 1280 of typical authors studied in the schools.<sup>18</sup>

Macer Floridus also figures quite prominently in the sources used by German botanists in the later Middle Ages and the Renaissance. It is mentioned in one of the first herbals published in Germany which was printed in 1484. Three of the most famous 16th century German scientists, Paracelsus (1493-1554), Jerome Bock of Strassbourg (1498-1554), and Jacob Theodore of Bergzabern (1520-1590) all refer to this work in their medical texts.<sup>19</sup> When, during the 17th century, medicine and botany came to rely more heavily on experimental

methods and increasingly less on the authority of the ancients, Macer was gradually abandoned; although it was still listed by one writer as late as 1740 as an authoritative medical work.<sup>20</sup> It is interesting to note that in the 14th century a number of herbals appeared bearing the title "Macer," yet differing fundamentally in their content from the Latin Macer Floridus. This might be given as evidence that by this time the term "Macer" denoted *any* catalogue of herbs with their medicinal uses.<sup>21</sup>

Numerous copies of Macer Floridus exist in both manuscript and printed form. At least three manuscripts are in the British Museum. The oldest we know is an incomplete fragment in the Staatsarchiv in Vienna. Most of the manuscripts are found in Germany, France and England in that order of frequency. Printed versions began appearing in 1477 with a Venice edition and then it was published further north, particularly in France, Switzerland and Germany. The most recently printed copy is the critical edition by the physician Ludwig Choulant in 1832, which is based almost solely on manuscripts and printed editions found in the libraries of Dresden and Leipzig. The late Lynn Thorndike used this rendition in his critical edition of the herbal of Rufinus (mentioned above).<sup>22</sup>

One testimonial to the wide influence Macer had on subsequent medical and botanical commentators is the number of translations of the herbal into vernacular languages and dialects. These appear, in varying forms, in German, French, Danish, Italian, Catalan, Middle Dutch and Middle English.<sup>23</sup> Although the bulk of the material presented in the herbal is borrowed from earlier sources and rendered in a tedious style, the evidence here presented makes it clear that Macer Floridus was one important avenue of transmission for ancient medical lore and was one of the most influential works on botanical pharmacy and therapeutics from the 11th century to the Renaissance and after.

### Notes and References

1. Macer Floridus, *A Middle English Translation of Macer Floridus De viribus herbarum*, ed. by Gösta Frisk (Upsala: Lindequist; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1949), p. 12. For the full text of the *Regimen Sanitatis Salernitanum* see Salvatore de Renzi, *Collectio Salernitana* (Napoli: Sebizio, 1857).
2. H. Stadler, "Die Quellen des Macer Floridus," *Archiv für die Geschichte der Naturwissenschaft und Technik*, I (1909), 53-56, 61. This author argues that some parts of *Macer Floridus* may have been taken from Constantinus Africanus.
3. Lynn Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science* (New York: MacMillan, 1923) I, 612-613. Ludwig Choulant (ed.), *Macer Floridus de viribus herbarum* (Lipsiae: Leopold Voss, 1832), p.2 as well as p. 65, versus 900-906 "Ligusticum." Adolf Ebert, *Allgemeine Geschichte der Literatur des Mittelalters in Abendland* (Leipzig: F.C.W. Vogel, 1887), III, 352n., Jo. Baptista Morgagni, *Opuscula Miscellanea* (Venetiis: Remondiniana, 1763), pp. 103-105, Cyrill Resak, *Odo Magdunensis der Verfasser des "Macer Floridus" und der deutsche Leipziger Macer Text* (Borna-Leipzig: R. Noske, 1917), pp. 7-8, Walafrid Strabo, *Hortulus*, trans. by Raef Payne (Pittsburgh: Hunt Botanical Library, 1966), p. 45, Valentin Rose, "Über Medicina Plinii," *Hermes*, VIII (1874), 63n.
4. Baudry de Balzac, "Recherches sur le pseudonyme Floridus Macer," *Memoires de la Société des Sciences morales des lettres et des arts de Seine-et-Oise*, I (1847), 87, 126, Ernst Meyer, *Geschichte der Botanik* (Königsberg: Borntrager, 1857), III, 432.
5. *Isidori Hipalenisis Episcopi Etymologia sive Originum*, ed. by W. M. Lindsay (Oxonii: Clarendoniano, 1911), XII, 4, 24: "Chelichas: hic per quam labitur terram, fumare facit: quam sic Macer describit (8):  
Seu terga expirant spumantia viris,  
Seu terra fumat qua teter labitur anguis."  
See also Baudry de Balzac, p. 114, 126-128, Choulant, *Macer*, pp. 1-2, C. T. Lewis and Charles Short, *Harpers Latin Dictionary* (New York: Harper, 1882), p. 326 under the word "chelydrus," Gaudentius Merula, *De Gallorum Cisalpinorum antiquitate ac origine* (Bergomi: A. Antonii, 1529), p. 54: "Sed hic libellus qui sub Macri nomine circumfertur non-huius est, sed Odonis cuiusdam medici ut ipse vidi in codice quodam antiquissimo." See also Meyer, p. 427, Rose, p. 63.
6. Meyer, p. 430. As examples he cites in verse 1202 "Brassica" for the latin "Caulis"; in verse 1489 "Elna" for the latin "Enula"; and in verse 2015 "Lolium" for the latin "Nigella." See also Renzi, I, 113.
7. Max Manitius, *Geschichte der lateinischen Literatur* (München: Beck, 1923), II, 543, 545. "Radix melaena" occurs in verse 122 "nardus gallica" in verses 61-64, "celtica spica" in verse 2200 and "derte" in

- verse 299. See also Albrecht von Haller, *Bibliotheca Botanica* (Tiguri: Orell, Gessner, Fussli, 1771), I, 215.
8. Ludwig Choulant, *Handbuch der Bücherkunde für die Ältere Medizin* (Leipzig: Voss, 1848), p. 234: "Dass derselbe in Frankreich gelebt haben müsse, ist aus der Orthographie und manchen Namen der Kräuter (*Gaisdo*, *Jusquiamus*, *Paratella*, *Gingiber*,) so wie aus manchen anderen Angaben wahrscheinlich." See also A. Tschirch and E. O. von Lippmann, *Allgemeine Pharmakognosie* (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1933), pp. 1391-1392.
  9. Manitiuss, pp. 539-540, Morgagni, p. 104, Friederich Boerner, "De Aemilio Macro eiusque Rariore Hodie Opusculo de Virtutibus Herbarum," *Noctes Guelphicae* (Rostochii et Wismariae: Andr. et Iac. Boednerum, 1775), p. 116. Hermann Fischer, *Mittelalterlichen Pflanzenkunde* (München: Münchenerdrucke, 1929), p. 16.
  10. Stadler, pp. 62, 65. For Sigebertus Gemblacensis see Joannis Albertus Fabricius, *Bibliotheca ecclesiastica* (Hamburg: C. Liebegeit and T. C. Felgmer, 1718), p. 94 and Joannis Albertus Fabricius, *Bibliotheca Latina* (facs. ed. Graz: Akademische Druck und Verlagsanstalt, 1962), V. 3.
  11. Stadler, p. 64, Choulant, *Macer*, pp. 5-14.
  12. Stadler, pp. 53-56, 61.
  13. Meyer, pp. 426, 433, Baudry de Balzac, p. 85, Choulant, *Handbuch*, p. 233, Ebert, pp. 352-353.
  14. John M. Riddle, "Theory and Practice in Medieval Medicine," *Viator*, V (1974), 177, Jerry W. Stannard, "Medieval Herbals and their Development," *Clio Medica*, IX, no. 1 (March 1974), 23-32 as well as his "The Herbal as a Medical Document," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, XLIII, no. 3 (May-June 1969), 217.
  15. G. R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961), p. 192, Franz Pfeiffer (ed.), *Berthold von Regensburg: Vollständige Ausgabe seiner Predigten mit Anmerkungen* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1965), I, 517, Resak, p. 17: "...unde lebete noch her Galiénus unde her Constantinus unde her Avicennâ unde her Macer unde her Bartholoméus,—die wären die aller hôhesten meister diu von Erzenie ie gelâsen, unde habent alle Künste erfunden unde erdâht, die von Erzenie ie ward erdâht—, unde lebten die alle noch, sie môhten etelichen siechtuom niemer gebûezen."
  16. H. Schelenz, *Geschichte der Parmazie* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1912), pp. 306, 324, J. Zacher, "Macer Floridus und die Entstehung der deutschen Botanik," *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie*, XII (1881), 194n.2, 197-198, Lynn Thorndike, *The Herbal of Rufinus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), p. xxix and for examples of quotations of Macer see pp. 201, 228, Nicolaus Praepositi, *Dispensarium... Nicolai Praepositi ad aromatarios...* (Lugduni: Gabiano, 1537), p. 74, Manitiuss, p. 546, Choulant, *Macer*, p. 32, line 100.
  17. Vincentius Bellovacensis, *Speculum Naturale* (Argentinae, impressor qui dicitur legendae aureae, ca. 1481, ca. 1483), Klebs 1036.2 Book XI, chapter 79, "De Feniculo," and Book XI, chapter 101, "De Nepeta." The similarity of Vincentius and the critical edition of Choulant is readily apparent. Alexander Neckam, *De Naturis Rerum*, ed. by Thomas Wright (London: Longmans, Green, Longmans, Roberts and Green, 1863), p. 275: "Effectus autem herbarum et proprietatis diligenter prosequuntur Macer et Dioscorides et multi alii."
  18. See Manitiuss, p. 546 where he lists items 271-278 found in J. Huemer's edition of Hugo of Trimberg's work in the former's *Ein Quellenbuch zur lateinische Literaturgeschichte des Mittelalters* (Vienna: Akademie Sitzungsberichte, 1881), p. 176. See also John E. Sandys, *History of Classical Scholarship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1908), I, 622.
  19. G. A. Pritzel, *Thesaurus Literaturae Botanicae* (Lipsiae: Brockhaus, 1872), p. 199, Meyer, p. 184, C. F. Baehr, *Geschichte der Römische Literatur* (Karlsruhe: Chr. Fr. Muller'schen Hofbuchhandlung, 1840), III, 141, Choulant, *Handbuch*, p. 236, Choulant, *Macer*, p. 4, Baudry de Balzac, p. 86, Manitiuss, p. 547. For Paracelsus' remarks see J. Huser (ed.), *Paracelsus Bucher und Schriften* (Basel: C. Waldkirch, 1589), pp. 1070-1088, 1095-1100, Heironymus Bock, *Neue Kreutterbuch* (Strassburg: Rihel, 1577), sig. folio liii verso and p. 24. See also Choulant, *Macer*, p. 91, line 1532, and Zacher, pp. 205-207. On p. 211 Zacher maintains he has found no reference to Aemilius Macer among the works of Bock.
  20. A. Joanne-Francisco Seguerio, *Bibliotheca Botanica...* (Lugdunibatorum: apud Cornelium Haak, 1740), pp. 273-274.
  21. E. S. Rohde, *The Old English Herbals* (London: Longmans and Co., 1922), p. 42, Frisk, p. 16. See also R. N. Johnson, "A New Herbal of Macer and Banckes's Herbal: Notes on Robert Wyer and the Printing of Cheap Handbooks of Science in the Sixteenth Century," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, XV (1944), 249, W. L. Wardale (ed.), *Albrecht van Borgunnien's treatise on medicine (Sloane Ms. 3002, British Museum)* (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), pp. xxiv-xxv.
  22. Thorndike, *Herbal of Rufinus*, p. xxxii n. 34.
  23. W. F. Daems, "Die mnl. Macerglossen in Ms. 6838A der Nationalen Bibliothek zu Paris," *Janus: Revue internationale de l'histoire des sciences, de la médecine, de la pharmacie et de la technique*, LIII (1966), 22. For the French translation see Macer Floridus, *Des Vertus des Plantes*, traduit par M. Louis Baudet (Paris: C. L. F. Panckoucke, 1845), with commentary in G. Sarton, *Introduction to the History of Science* (Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins, 1927-1948), pp. 765-767, Frisk, p. 5. For the Catalan version see Cesar E. Dubler (ed.), *La "Materia Medica" de Dioscorides Trasmision medieval y Reacentista* (Barcelona: Tipografia Emporium, 1953), I, xxi. For the various German translations see Jerry W. Stannard, "Greco-Roman Materia Medica in Medieval Germany," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, XLVI, no. 5 (September-October 1972), 468 n. 86.